

**CHIGWELL PARISH COUNCIL
OFFICER'S REPORT TO FULL COUNCIL**

Meeting Date: 26/03/2026

Subject: Community Use Assessment – Request for Extended Use of Victory Hall

1. Purpose of Report

To present to Full Council an assessment of a request for extended or longer-term community use of Victory Hall by a specific community group. This report outlines the benefits, risks, policy considerations, equality implications, and governance issues, and seeks a Council decision on whether such long-term use should be approved, limited, or declined.

2. Background

A community group currently permitted to use the Victory Hall for Friday prayer sessions and occasional additional bookings has expressed interest in seeking more frequent or long-term use of the facility.

The Council's Community Use and Not-for-Profit Policy (adopted 26 July 2025) provide a framework for assessing eligibility, value for money, fairness, and community benefit arising from the use of Parish assets.

While faith-based and cultural groups are eligible to apply, extended regular bookings may have wider implications for equality, community cohesion, resource allocation, and public perception.

This report provides a structured assessment in keeping with the Council's statutory duties, policy framework, and commitment to equitable public service delivery.

3. Assessment

3.1 Community Benefits

Positive impacts of extended use could include:

- Increased use of the hall, contributing to the Council's aim to operate facilities cost-neutrally.
- A stable booking pattern offering predictable community engagement.
- Opportunities for ongoing cultural and community development.
- Regular positive presence in a Council asset.

These factors align with the "Value for Money" criteria within the Community Use Policy, including community benefit, frequency, accessibility, and alignment with Parish priorities.

3.2 Risks and Considerations

A. Fair Access and Equity

- Extended or long-term booking by a single group may unintentionally limit availability for other eligible organisations.
- Over-regularisation of one group's use could create an appearance of preferential treatment.
- The Council must ensure compliance with the Equality Act and maintain clear non-exclusive access for all groups.

B. Public Perception and Sensitivities

Given the current social climate, there is a risk that:

- Long-term, high-frequency religious use may be perceived as the hall operating as a de facto place of worship rather than a multi-use community facility.
- Residents may express concern if the balance of community use appears uneven.
- Increased use during periods such as Ramadan could add operational pressure and heighten external perception concerns.

These risks require careful management to preserve neutrality and avoid misinterpretation of the hall's purpose.

C. Operational Impact

- Greater frequency may conflict with wider community bookings or periodic events.
- Staff time required to manage bookings, oversee compliance, and resolve issues may increase.
- Wear and tear on the facility may rise with more intensive usage.

D. Policy Alignment

The Community Use Policy requires:

- Transparent application processes
- Evidence of community benefit
- Equitable access
- Periodic review and clear booking terms

Long-term or exclusive-leaning bookings may conflict with these expectations.

3.3 Equality Impact Overview

An Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) has been completed separately.

Key findings include:

- No unlawful discrimination is identified provided access for all groups is upheld.
- The main risk involves perception of exclusivity or reducing access for other protected groups.
- Mitigation measures include:
 - limiting frequency of use,
 - maintaining balanced booking availability,
 - clear communication confirming the hall remains a multi-use community asset,
 - transparent, fair application processes.

3.4 Options for Council Consideration

Option A – Approve Extended Use with Conditions (Recommended)

Council may approve extended but limited additional use on the following conditions:

- No exclusive or dominant pattern of use.
- Frequency capped to ensure balanced community access.
- Written agreement specifying that the hall remains a multi-purpose community facility.
- Clear review periods (e.g., every 6 months).
- Transparent charging in line with the Community Use Policy.
- Additional controls during periods of high demand (e.g., Ramadan).

Option B – Decline Request for Long-Term / High-Frequency Use

Council may decline if it concludes that:

- The risk to community cohesion is too great,
- Balanced access would be compromised,
- Operational pressures outweigh community benefit.

Option C – Defer Pending Consultation / Further Assessment

Council may request:

- A public consultation,
- A more extensive EIA,
- Further usage data,
- Additional governance or safeguarding conditions.

4. Recommendations

Full Council is asked to:

4.1 Note the contents of this assessment

Including community benefits, risks, equality considerations, and policy implications.

4.2 Approve Option A – Limited Extended Use (Recommended)

Subject to strict conditions ensuring:

- Non-exclusive access
- Protection of community balance
- Transparent and lawful booking processes
- Clear communication regarding the hall's multi-use nature
- Review mechanisms

4.3 Instruct the Clerk to issue a written agreement

Setting out:

- Permitted times and frequency
- Conditions of use
- Review dates
- Compliance with safeguarding, insurance, and hall regulations

4.4 Publish a neutral advisory statement

Reaffirming the Council's commitment to:

- Equality, diversity and inclusion
- Fair access for all groups
- The hall's role as a community-wide facility

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